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Boosting Foreign Language Self-Concept in Language Classrooms through Cooperative Learning Activities

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of cooperative learning techniques on foreign language self-concept and exploring the relationship between the foreign language self-concept and academic success. This research was carried out through an experimental design with experimental and control groups. In experimental language classrooms students are engaged in cooperative learning techniques whereas in control groups students are exposed to traditional lecture methods for thirteen weeks. Participants of this study consisted of 182 students enrolled in general English language courses in a two-year higher education institution. The data of the research were gathered by the Foreign Language Self-Concept Scale which was developed by the researcher and a reading comprehension placement test. The results demonstrated that the effect of cooperative learning on foreign language self-concept was found to be insignificant. Furthermore, there was no significant correlation between foreign language self-concept and reading comprehension scores.

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Keywords: Cooperative learning; foreign language self-concept; reading comprehension achievement.

1. Introduction

Foreign language learning being regarded as the key factor for determining the success in the working world has become extremely important especially for the students learning English. Although foreign language proficiency is not the only criteria influencing career development, a lot of effort is made to identify and improve the language development levels of students in schools. Furthermore, the quality of language education like the overall academic achievement often influenced the school's reputation in not only Turkey but also in many other countries seeking to be a part of the global economy. Despite the great efforts, schools still deal with a substantial amount of low achieving students in language classes because of the fact that many teachers still put more emphasis on the delivery of knowledge about the language, while ignoring the development of students' language abilities. This is actually a pure reflection of behaviorist model of learning which assumes that learning occurs by trial and error, repetition, and reinforcement of targeted behaviors. Thus, a corresponding curriculum design focuses on drill and practice,

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extensive immediate feedback, and a series of small goals or objectives to be achieved. Behaviorism focuses on the objectively observable aspects of learning and seeks to explain animal and human behavior entirely in terms of observable and measurable responses to environmental stimuli. According to behaviorists, behavior is a physiological reaction to environmental stimuli and they reject the exploration of mental processes as unscientific. Throughout the behaviorist reign the learner has been regarded as a passive member of the classroom which is shaped by the holy dominance of the omnipotent instructor. Unfortunately, up until 1970s many English Language Teaching programs were teacher-centered; drill based and discouraged students to become active participants in the learning process. So, for years education has been regarded as being the transmission of knowledge and the teacher is assumed to tell facts to the students from elementary right the way through to advanced level, and for those students then to be tested on whether they have managed to retain the presented facts, and if they manage to reproduce what the teacher has said, they get a top mark.

Since, traditional lectures which have been the form of learning and teaching for decades turned out to be insufficient in providing learning opportunities to the students and teachers in order to fulfill the needs of the new generation learners, instructional designs based on constructivist pedagogy emerged as a solution to problems in teaching-learning contexts. Constructivism, in contrast to behaviorism, is based on the simple premise that learners construct their own knowledge. Understanding is not passed intact from instructor to student; rather, students use information passed on by the instructor as just one part of many in the formulation of their understandings. The constructivist curriculum is designed so that students express what they currently understand, and then instruction is arranged to build from this understanding. Instructors who hold a constructivist view of learning design courses that encourage students to interact frequently with other students and teachers.

The rise of learners as unique individuals led to a move from the idea to find the best approach or method to teach a foreign language, to designing one's own instructional design specific to the educational environment in which the needs of the learners are to be met. As the learner variables such as age, cognition, native language, educational background etc. diverge into numerous areas have gained widespread recognition, the awareness of various learner needs, individual learning styles, different educational structures, learners' expectations led the educators to focus on improving students' learning environments. Thus, the role of affective variables like students' attitudes and motivation, language anxiety, learning styles, and perceptions of individual learners has attracted much attention over the past few decades (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). Academic self-concept is one of the most important of these variables that has a reciprocal relation with academic performance in a large number of studies (Guay, Marsh, & Boivin, 2003). Some of the definitions of academic self-concept are as follows:

Self-concept refers to a person's self-perceptions, and academic self-concept refers to a person's beliefs about their own academic abilities and it is hierarchical and multifaceted in nature such that self-concepts in specific domains such as English, math, history, and science are the subcomponents of one general academic self-concept. (Shavelson et al., 1976).

Trautwein, Lüdtke, Marsh, Köller, and Baumert (2006) defined academic self-concept as "a person's self-evaluation regarding a specific academic domain or ability."

Self-concept refers to the individual's self-beliefs, hypotheses and assumptions. In other words, self-concept of an individual is the totality of opinions that each person holds to be true about his or her personal existence. It is multifaceted and influenced by contextual variables (Marsh, 1993).

Fortunately, beginning from the second half of the twentieth century experts in the field of education and psychology have conducted extensive research to get a clear picture of classroom and to figure out the dynamics of learning. Findings of those researches pointed out that traditional approaches ignoring the individual learner have failed in explaining mysterious reciprocal relationships among the essential components of the classroom i.e. the learner, the instructor and the context they exist. Hence, classroom context in which two major actors of teaching i.e. student and teacher interact and teaching process take place has become focus of interest for those seeking utmost success in education. Pursuing success in schools, educators have realized the essential role of affective variables in learning environments and the necessity of focusing on the emotional states of learners and they led the researchers to do substantial research on academic self-concept. As expected, many researchers have reported a positive correlation between student academic self-concept and performance in the language learning class (Liu, 2008). Researchers also found that academic self-concepts of students may be enhanced when they are placed in a high-achieving group and "assimilation effects" occur in this case (Marsh, Kong, & Hau, 2000).

Educational psychology research which has been devoted to studying the relationship between self-concept and academic achievement provided us substantial amount of data and helped the educators to answer the two major questions; whether self- concept is a cause or an outcome of academic achievement and whether correlations

between both are positive, negative or insignificant. Research evidence proved that self-concept influences behavior and students' thoughts about themselves will determine the way they deal with the challenges of the learning experience and also their relationship with others (Arnold, 2007) This study particularly focuses on one of the most important the contextual variables affecting individual learners i.e. self concept, and presents a research carried out to improve it via cooperative learning practices which are all applied forms of constructivist theory.

2. Cooperative Learning

Constructivists concerned with the issue of learning and interested in the nature of knowledge and factors influencing cognition process. Constructivist theory explains how students learn but does not state the teaching procedures to be applied in constructivist classrooms. Active learning model developed on the principles constructivist theory sets techniques and procedures to apply constructivist theory in the classroom. Cooperative learning as a form of active learning is a general title for a set of classroom teaching methods where students work in small groups to help one another study academic subject matter (Tan,Sharan & Lee, 2006, p. 4). During cooperative learning activities students are held accountable for their contribution, participation and learning. Students are also provided incentives to work as team in teaching others and learning from others (Slavin, 2000). In a cooperative lesson, students are involved in the process of learning in an active way: Learning requires students' direct and active involvement and participation i.e. learning is something students do, not something that is done to students (Johnson, Johnson&Holubec, 1994, p. 4). Not all group works are cooperative learning and working in small groups is not enough for students to realize cooperative learning. It is only under the following conditions that a group work can be cooperative learning;

1. Group Award: To be successful it is a must for members to have a group with success. In other words groups must be successful in order to be members of the group to be successful.
2. Positive Interdependence: Creates a situation that individuals combine their efforts for reward and common purpose. Each group member has a unique contribution to make to the joint effort because of his or her resources and/or role and task responsibilities.
3. Individual Accountability: Group success depends on each individual's learning. Each student should have the responsibility of learning all the material and doing what is s/he is expected to do.
4. Face-to-Face Interaction: Group members encourage each other and facilitate each other's effort.
5. Social skills: Students should be taught how interpersonal relations should be and they should be encouraged to use them.
6. Evaluation of Group Process: It should be decided which member acts of the group contribute to reach the group goals and which of them should be changed or eliminated.
7. Equal Opportunity for Success: Contribution of students by developing their own performances. Scoring individual efforts can be used to ensure this goal (Açıkgöz, 2003).

Extensive research has revealed that cooperative learning provides strong academic improvement, as well as overall positive benefits in student behavior, self-esteem, and motivation (Slavin, 1995). Box and Little (2003) examined the effects of cooperative learning on self-concept and concluded that students' self-concepts are positively influenced by the cooperative learning practices. The casual relation between cooperative learning and academic self-concept of the students is questioned by Joseph F. Zisk's study in 1998. Zisk's study entitled as "The effects of cooperative learning on 10th graders' academic self-concept and achievements" pointed out the fact that experiment group students engaged in the cooperative learning techniques acquired higher academic achievement than the traditional lecture group i.e. control group students (Zisk, 1998). Zisk also found that the difference between the control and experiment groups' self-concept scores is statistically significant. In other words, cooperative learning practices created a positive effect on the experiment group students. Another researcher studied the effects of cooperative learning techniques on reading comprehension achievement and academic self-concept is Ghaith. His research provided evidence on the positive effects of cooperative learning techniques on reading comprehension achievement but the research data showed that in terms of academic self-concept scores there isn't a statistically significant difference between the control and experiment group students (Ghaith, 2003). Findings of empirical studies which emphasize the relationship of academic achievement and interpersonal communication skills have shown that academic achievement is positively influenced by the amount of active participation of students in the learning process (Gardner et al., 1994). Shimazoe and Aldrich (2010) reports benefits of cooperative

learning for students such as promoting deep learning of materials, achieving better grades, learning social skills and developing positive attitudes toward autonomous learning.

3. Research Questions

This study will address research questions pertaining to the relationship between foreign language self-concept and reading comprehension test achievement and the effects of cooperative learning on foreign language self-concept across control and experiment group students. The following questions will be addressed through this study:

1. Is there a correlation between foreign language self-concept and reading comprehension test achievement?
2. Do the cooperative learning activities lead to a statistically significant difference in the control and experiment group students' foreign language self-concepts?

4. Method

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of cooperative learning techniques on foreign language self-concept and exploring the relationship between the foreign language self-concept and academic success i.e. reading comprehension achievement. In order to maximize the impact of the curriculum, it was a must to abandon the traditional lecture method which was dictated by the obsolete course books. So, active learning practices in the form of cooperative learning techniques would be a solution to the problem. Since, teachers play a major role in starting up a new program and adopting an innovation in an institution teacher readiness is one of the basic determinants of success, it was thought that in order to apply active learning techniques successfully, teaching the academic staff was a must. So, all the teaching staff participated in this study attended a cooperative learning in-service training program. Cooperative learning training program comprised the theoretical background, discussion of theory and practice teaching sessions followed by discussions. This program totally lasted three months. It is expected that this study would enable the educational administrators to compare the present and proposed educational practices in the light of valid research data.

4. 1. Research Design:

In this research, pretest-posttest experimental design with control group was employed. Language teaching based on the cooperative learning techniques was used in the randomly chosen experimental groups whereas traditional language teaching methods were used in the randomly chosen control groups. Following the pre-test administration of Foreign Language Self-Concept Scale and Reading Comprehension Test, cooperative learning techniques were applied to experimental groups for thirteen weeks while the control groups got traditional English language teaching methods. At the end of the experiment, the same Foreign Language Self-Concept Scale and Reading Comprehension Test were administrated as post-tests.

4.2. Subjects:

Participants in this study consisted of 182 male students enrolled in general English language courses in a two-year higher education institution i.e. a vocational college in Turkey. In the Spring Term of 2005-2006 Academic Year, five groups (n=92) formed the experimental groups, and five groups (n=90) formed the control groups. Their language levels in English were all pre-intermediate. The respondents were high school graduates ranged in age from 17 to 19. They were all freshman students with a 27 class hour per week English language teaching program.

4.3. Instruments:

The data of the research were gathered by a five point likert type scale and a reading comprehension placement test. Participants' academic self-concept scores were measured by the Foreign Language Self-Concept Scale (FLSCS). FLSCS consisted of 34 items and was developed by the researcher. FLSCS comprising Likert Scale Type of questions with five choices from 1 to 5 (1=Strongly Disagree (SD), 2= Disagree (D), 3=Undecided (U), 4=Agree (A) and 5=Strongly Agree (SA). The first form of FLSCS had 60 items and it was applied to group of 360 students having the same properties with the study groups. As a result of the data obtained, it was established that the

reliability of FLSCS i.e. Cronbach's Alpha was 0.955. Cambridge Preliminary English Test (PET), an intermediate-level test developed by University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), made of 35 items was given as the pre-test and post-test to measure the participants' level of reading comprehension.

4.4. Data Analysis:

Data of the research is derived from two sources. The first group of data gathered through the administration of the Reading Comprehension Test (PET) to the students to determine their proficiency levels in reading English. Second group of data is obtained from the application of the Foreign Language Self-Concept Scale which is a measurement tool used for determining students' self-concepts. Evaluating the participants' responses to the scale the scores on the negatively worded items were reversed in order to ensure that high scores meant agreement with the truth of the statements. Two-way Repeated Measures ANOVA which is used to determine the possible differences occurring in two or more groups was employed in the study. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for the purpose of data entry, manipulation, and analysis. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were used to describe the study sample. Comparison of means was done using t-test. The level of significance selected for this study was $p< 0.05$ level.

5. Results

The research hypotheses of this study and the findings related to these hypotheses are as follows. The first research hypothesis of this study is stated as, "There is a correlation between Foreign Language Self-Concept (FLSC) and reading comprehension test achievement of the experiment and control group students". Findings related to this hypothesis are presented below.

Table 1. Reading Comprehension Test Achievement and FLSC Points of Control and Experiment Groups Descriptive Statistics (Whole Group)

	n	$\overline{X}$	**ss**
Achievement Pre-test	182	19.49	4.10
Achievement Post-test	182	21.51	4.48
FLSC Pre-test	182	114.27	23.30
FLSC Post-test	182	118.51	23.60

The total number of participants of the study is 182. Pre-test and post-test mean scores of the experiment and control groups are presented in Table 1. As it is seen in Table 1, the participants' FLSC and reading comprehension test achievement pre-test scores are lower than their post-test scores. In order to find out the correlation between the experiment and control groups' FLSC and reading comprehension test achievement pre-test and post-test scores a number of analyses were done. The results of these analyses are as follows.

Table 2 . The Correlation between FLSC and Reading Comprehension Test Achievement of the Experiment and Control Groups (Whole Group)

		FLSC Pre-test	FLSC Post-test
Achievement Pre-test	r	0.15	-0.002
	p	0.022	0.488
	n	182	182
Achievement Post-test	r	0.09	-0.11
	p	0.111	-0.066
	n	182	182

Considering the values in Table 2, before the experiment taking the whole group into consideration there is a statistically significant correlation between the Reading Comprehension Test Achievement pre-test scores and Foreign Language Self-Concept pre-test scores (r=0.15 ; p< 0.05). On the other hand, after the experiment no statistically significant correlation is detected between the Reading Comprehension Test Achievement post-test scores and Foreign Language Self-Concept post-test scores (r= -0.11 ; p< 0.05). Based on these findings it can be concluded that there is no statistically significant correlation between the Reading Comprehension Test Achievement post-test scores and Foreign Language Self-Concept post-test scores.

Table 3. Reading Comprehension Test Achievement and FLSC Points of Experiment Groups Descriptive Statistics

	n	$\overline{X}$	**ss**
Achievement Pre-test	92	19.08	4.19
Achievement Post-test	92	21.99	4.23
FLSC Pre-test	92	112.77	25.46
FLSC Post-test	92	119.02	24.64

As it is shown in Table 3, 92 students formed the experiment group. The experiment group students' FLSC and reading comprehension test achievement pre-test scores are lower than their post-test scores. In order to find out the correlation between the experiment groups' FLSC and reading comprehension test achievement pre-test and post-test scores a number of analyses were done. The results of these analyses are as follows.

Table 4. The Correlation between FLSC and Reading Comprehension Test Achievement of the Experiment Groups

		FLSC Pre-test	FLSC Post-test
Achievement Pre-test	r	0.11	-0.74
	p	0.143	0.241
	n	92	92
Achievement Post-test	r	0.02	-0.14
	p	0.418	0.095
	n	92	92

Considering the values in Table 4, taking the experiment group into consideration before the experiment (r=0.11 ; p>0.05) and after the experiment (r= -0.14 ; p>0.05) there is no statistically significant correlation between the Reading Comprehension Test Achievement scores and Foreign Language Self-Concept scores. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is no correlation between the Reading Comprehension Test Achievement and Foreign Language Self-Concept. It can also be stated that experimental practices i.e. cooperative learning activities did not have positive effects on Foreign Language Self-Concept.

Table 5. Reading Comprehension Test Achievement and FLSC Points of Control Groups Descriptive Statistics

	n	$\overline{X}$	**ss**
Achievement Pre-test	90	19.91	3.98
Achievement Post-test	90	21.01	4.70
FLSC Pre-test	90	115.81	20.88
FLSC Post-test	90	117.99	22.63

As it is shown in Table 5, 90 students formed the control group. The control group students' FLSC and reading comprehension test achievement pre-test scores are lower than their post-test scores. In order to find out the correlation between the control groups' FLSC and reading comprehension test achievement pre-test and post-test scores a number of analyses were done. The results of these analyses are as follows.

Table 6. The Correlation between FLSC and Reading Comprehension Test Achievement of the Control Groups

		FLSC Pre-test	FLSC Post-test
Achievement Pre-test	r	0.19	0.09
	p	0.040	0.207
	n	90	90
Achievement Post-test	r	0.19	-0.09
	p	0.038	0.189
	n	90	90

Considering the values in Table 6, taking the control groups into consideration before the experiment there is a statistically significant correlation between the Reading Comprehension Test Achievement pre-test scores and Foreign Language Self-Concept pre-test scores ($r=0.19$; $p< 0.05$). However, after the experiment no statistically significant correlation is detected between the Reading Comprehension Test Achievement post-test scores and Foreign Language Self-Concept post-test scores ($r= -0.09$; $p< 0.05$). Based on this, it can be concluded that there is no statistically significant correlation between the Reading Comprehension Test Achievement and Foreign Language Self-Concept. So, it can also be claimed that traditional lecture method applied to control group students did not have positive effects on Foreign Language Self-Concept.

The second research hypothesis of this study and the findings related to this hypothesis are as follows. The second research hypothesis of this study is stated as; "Foreign Language Self-Concept Scale (FLSCS) points of the experiment group students are higher than the control group students' Foreign Language Self-Concept Scale points". The dependent variable of this hypothesis is students' FLSCS points, and independent variable is the techniques employed in the experiment. Findings related to this hypothesis are presented below. Descriptive statistics of the control and experiment groups are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. FLSC Points of Control and Experiment Groups Descriptive Statistics (Whole Group)

	Group	**n**	$\overline{X}$	**sd**
Pre-test	Experiment	92	112.7	25.46
	Control	90	115.81	20.88
	Total	182	114.27	23.30
Post-test	Experiment	92	119.02	24.64
	Control	90	117.99	22.63
	Total	182	118.51	23.60

The total number of participants of the study is 182. Pre-test and post-test mean scores of these two groups are presented in Table 8. Foreign Language Self-Concept Scale pre-test points are lower than the post-test points in both groups. In order to find out the interaction effect between the groups Two-Way Repeated-Measures ANOVA was done. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. FLSC Points of Control and Experiment Groups Two-Way Repeated-Measures ANOVA (Whole Group)

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Grup	91.583	1	91.583	0.15	0.698*
FLSC	1615.68	1	1615.68	3.25	0.073*
FLSC *Group	377.22	1	377.22	0.76	0.385*
Error (FLSC)	89629.20	180	497.94		

*$p < 0.05$

According to the Two-Way Repeated-Measures ANOVA results, the control and experiment groups' Foreign Language Self-Concept Scale points can be interpreted as follows;

1. The analysis based on the group variability, no statistically significant difference is detected (p=0.698).
2. The analysis carried out ignoring the group variability and taking only the achievement variability pointed out that there is no statistically significant difference (p=0.073).
3. The analysis carried out considering both the pre-test/post-test and the control/experiment groups interaction also showed that there is no statistically significant difference (p=0.385).

6. Discussion

This study was mainly designed to gain insight into academic self-concept that has been regarded to have a reciprocal relation with academic performance and considered to be an essential variable affecting the foreign language learning process. The results of this study demonstrated that there is no correlation between the Reading Comprehension Test Achievement and Foreign Language Self-Concept. Furthermore, no statistically significant difference was detected between the control and experiment groups' Foreign Language Self-Concept Scale points. It is hardly possible to relate the findings of this study to many others and those findings contradict previous research showing that positive self-concept was linked to high academic achievement. Don Hamchek's study proved that there is a reciprocal and dynamic relation between self-concept and achievement (Hamachek, 1995). Herbert W. Marsh also questioned the correlation between academic self-concept and achievement through a study done in Hong Kong and lasted for six years. The participants of this study were 7802 students from 56 different high schools. The findings of this study showed that there is a reciprocal relation between self-concept and achievement (Marsh, 2002). Another research again done in Hong Kong proved that there is a positive correlation between foreign language self-concept and achievement of the participants (Lau,Yeung, and Jin, 1998). DeMoulin's study -actually it was a project called "I Like Me!"- aimed at improving the primary school students' self-concepts through developing their reading comprehension achievement and the findings of the study showed that achievement has positive effects on self-concept (DeMoulin, 1997). However it should be kept in mind that this study was also done on primary school students and not on higher education students.

Since the current study's findings showed that the difference between the experiment and control groups isn't found to be statistically significant, it is concluded that cooperative learning did not have a substantial effect on experiment group students' academic self-concepts. These results do not match with Zisk's study. Zisk's study entitled as "The effects of cooperative learning on 10th graders' academic self-concept and achievements" pointed out the fact that experiment group students engaged in the cooperative learning techniques acquired higher academic achievement than the traditional lecture group i.e. control group students (Zisk, 1998). Zisk also found that the difference between the control and experiment groups' self-concept scores is statistically significant. In other words, cooperative learning practices created a positive effect on the experiment group students.

Rosenberg, (1965) stated that self-concept develops gradually and substantial changes in self-concept is experienced in childhood and adolescent periods. He also pointed out the fact that self-concept is not stable and it changes throughout life. Richardson (2003) also carried out a research to find out the relationship between the self-concept and reading comprehension achievement. His research lasted for six weeks and the results indicated that cooperative learning techniques improved the students' reading skills but the students' negative attitudes towards

reading didn't turn into positive. So, he concluded that individuals build attitudes-like self-concepts- in years, and it is hard to change attitudes in a short time period such as six weeks. School experiences do shape students' self-concepts. Scientists found out that the difficulty experienced in reading skill in the early years of schooling in return affects academic development in a negative way. The students having difficulty in reading in the first grades of school experience fear and anxiety in classrooms. Fear and anxiety are the two barriers to learning and emotional development. They not only hinder academic achievement but also they also make the students develop negative attitudes and low academic self-concepts. As the students grow, low levels of achievement lead to the development of low academic self-concepts and as the years pass it becomes quite hard to break this cycle (Marsh, 1993). Although the current research didn't yield evidence to claim a linear relationship between the self-concept and achievement, it is valuable as a study done on college students.

7. Conclusion

This research is important in that it has emphasized that the there is a causality between academic self-concept and achievement and understanding this has very important practical implications for educators. Through the study language classes enriched by cooperative learning practices enabled the students to participate, act, react, and reflect both individually and in groups of three or four. As a conclusion, the findings of this research reveal that the likelihood of positive results in reading classes is quite high if cooperative learning is implemented effectively. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations can be made for the language teachers, program managers and researchers.

1. Since it takes time to improve self-concept of an individual, implementation of a new longitudinal research - lasting at least for two semesters- would help to clarify the effects of cooperative learning on students' foreign language self-concepts.
2. This study aimed at detecting the correlation between foreign language self-concept and reading achievement. Further research is needed to clarify the correlation between foreign language self-concept and students' listening, speaking and writing achievement.
3. In order to find out effects of language mastery levels of students on the development of foreign language self-concept a similar study can be done on students with various proficiency levels of English.
4. Being accomplished at the university level makes this study valuable, but similar research is also needed on students with different levels of education.

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